

Analyzing Characters

Slovenly manners, a magnetic personality, a competitive streak—these are the kinds of qualities that can shape your impressions of other people. For example, an egomaniac is probably not someone you would want as a friend. But finding out *why* that person behaves the way he or she does might change your opinion. Characters in literature can be just as complicated as real people. By closely analyzing characters, you can get more out of the stories you read and gain insights into human nature.

Part 1: Character Development

Writers use many techniques to create their characters. Sometimes, the narrator of a story will tell you directly about a character, as in this example: “Enrique’s active imagination often got him into trouble.” More often, though, you will find out about characters indirectly. The writer may describe

- a character’s physical appearance
- a character’s actions, thoughts, and speech
- other characters’ reactions to and comments about the character

By examining these characterization techniques, you can infer a character’s **traits**, or qualities, such as insecurity or bravery. For example, what can you infer about this character from the following sentences? “Elena eyed her teammates critically. Am I the *only* one who knows how to play this game? she thought.”

The extent to which a writer develops a character depends on the character’s role in a story. Complex, highly developed characters, known as **round characters**, take center stage and seem the most lifelike. **Flat characters**, on the other hand, are one-sided.

ROUND CHARACTERS

Characteristics

- are complex; exhibit a variety of traits
- show a range of emotions
- display strengths and weaknesses
- often change over the course of a story



Role in the Story

- to serve as main characters who make a story rich and interesting
- to help define the theme

FLAT CHARACTERS

Characteristics

- are defined by only one or two traits
- show only a few emotions
- may be stereotypes or stock characters
- don’t grow or change



Role in the Story

- to serve as minor characters who advance the plot or provide information
- to reveal something about the main characters